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AUTHOR Furlong, Michael; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Increased concern about school violence in recent years has been associated with proposed changes in educational public policy. This paper presents the results of a national study that asked NASP members about their personal and professional experiences with school violence. The questionnaire was modeled after instruments created in California for teachers and was modified to address the training and service delivery of school psychologists. The study group consisted of field-based school psychologists (N=121) who gave their perceptions of campus violence. The majority of the psychologists (64.1 percent) reported little or no worry about their personal safety at school while 11.9 percent reported worrying about their personal safety at school weekly or daily. When researchers divided the 19 violent incidents on the questionnaire into less serious and more serious categories, results showed that school psychologists who believe that they have a violence problem on their campuses reported a much higher occurrence of the 10 severe incidents than psychologists who felt they had no violence problem. Some 45.3 percent of psychologists reported feeling unprepared, at some level, to address school violence on their campuses. Six recommended ways that schools and psychologists can address violence at their schools are listed. Four graphs give response percentages. (RJM)

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# School Psychologists Respond to School Violence: A National Survey

Michael Furlong
University of California, Santa Barbara
Leslie Babinski
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
Scott Poland
Cypress Fairbanks Independent School District, Houston, Texas

## Abstract

Concern about school violence has increased in recent years and this has been associated with proposed changes in educational public policy. For example, Congress considered the *School Safety Act of 1993* (this act is likely to pass during the current Congressional session) and the Centers for Disease Control now considers youth violence to be a national epidemic. Curiously, however, this attention on school violence has come primarily from professionals outside of education. Given this circumstance, ***what has been school psychologists' role, as educators, in responding to school violence?*** This paper presents the results of a national study of NASP members that asked them about their personal and professional experiences with school violence.

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## Purpose of this Study

This study was completed in conjunction with the first two author's participation on the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing's School Violence Advisory Panel. This panel was created by legislative mandate with the directive to examine school violence in California and to make recommendations to increase educator's ability to prevent and respond to violence that occurs at school. Because so few studies of school psychologists' experience with school violence have been completed, this poster presentation focuses on descriptive information (a study by Larson (1993) recently presented the results of a retrospective survey of experienced school psychologists in rural Minnesota and the APA–NASP joint school violence task force is currently conducting a large scale school violence survey). In this study, school psychologists were asked about the types of violence that occurs on THEIR school campuses and the level of preparation they have to respond to it. In addition to informing the profession about this topic, implications for continuing professional development and precredential training are discussed.

Questions posed for this paper are:

- Do school psychologists report working in environments in which violence occurs?
- Are school psychologists prepared to respond meaningfully to violence when it does occur on their campuses?

## Procedure

The survey instrument was modeled after similar ones created *by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing School Violence Advisory Panel.* (See display for copy of survey questionnaire.) The instrument was specifically modified to address training

and service delivery issues pertinent to school psychologists. Questions were asked about (a) perceptions of the level of violence on campus, (b) they types of violence that had occurred on campus in the previous month, (c) the most violent incident that had ever occurred on campus, and (d) preparedness to address school violence.

Survey data were collected in two ways. First, questionnaires were distributed by mail to a random sample of NASP members. Nonrespondents to an initial mailing were sent a follow-up reminder. (Survey methodology followed standards discussed by Weathers, Furlong, and Solórzano, 1993.) Second, a few surveys were gathered at a conference about school violence. Altogether responses from 121 field-based school psychologists were obtained, representing a response rate of more than 60%. Responses were received from school psychologists in all major geographical areas of the country.

## Results

***1. How much do school psychologists worry about school violence?*** The majority of the school psychologists (64.1%) reported worrying "very little" or "not at all" about their personal safety at school. About 1 out of 10 (11.9%) reported worrying about their personal safety at school "weekly" or "daily." In a related question, 74.4% of all respondents said that they "never" had thought of leaving the school psychology profession because of worries about school violence.

***2. How big of a problem is school violence?*** Only 1.7% of the school psychologists indicated that THEIR schools had a "very big problem" with school violence. This proportion is very similar to those reported in the 1978 NIE Violent Schools–Safe Schools study. Also, for comparison to other groups of educators, refer to **Figure 1** (data from other CTC surveys).

Overall, however, a sizable proportion of the respondents (36.7%) indicated that

there was a "middle size" or greater problem with violence on THEIR campuses. It is of interest to note that in comparison to the principals involved in the National Institute of Education Study (1978) *the school psychologists surveyed were more likely to report that they believed that their schools had a moderate or worse problem with violence* (36.8% vs. 25%).

***3. What types of school violence occur?*** Among various questions in the survey the 121 responding field-based school psychologists reported on the occurrence on 19 violence and safety-related experiences on their school campuses in the previous month (to students or staff). These incidents were the type of violence-related incidents that occur in a typical month. The results showed that of 19 incidents an average of 9.2 (SD = 3.2) were reported to have occurred. More than 3 out of 4 school psychologists reported that the following forms of violence occurred during the past month on their campuses:

- 90.6% Someone yelled bad words, cursed
- 86.3% Grabbed or shoved by someone mean
- 82.1% Punched or kicked
- 76.1% Verbally threatened with force
- 75.2% Put down of race or ethnicity

***4. Are the types of violence that occur on campuses with a school violence problem the same as those that happen on safe campuses?*** Interestingly, however, when the respondents were categorized into those who reported moderate or worse school violence on their campuses (36.7%) and those who perceived little or no school violence problems (63.3%) some interesting differences were uncovered. When the 19 violence incidents are split into less serious and more serious catego-

ries, it was found that school psychologists who believe that they have a violence problem on their campuses reported the occurrence of significantly more of the 10 severe incidents than those who felt they had no violence problem (M = 4.1, SD = 2.2 and M = 2.2, SD = 1.6, respectively, $t_{114} = 5.7$, $p < .001$). The mean scores on the 9 less severe problems were also significantly different (violence problem group, M = 7.6, SD = 1.7; no violence problem group, M = 6.1, SD = 2.1, $t_{114} = 3.95$, $p < .001$)). As shown in **Figure 2,** it is noteworthy that the less severe problem were reported to occur on many campuses, whether or not there was a generalized impression of violence being a problem. The perception of school violence appears to be related to the occurrence of severe forms of violence on campus, ones that clearly involve more intense, obvious assault to person or property. This finding lends support to a continuum model of school violence as it suggests that various forms of less severe interpersonal violence (e.g., verbal attacks) are tolerated without being labeling as "violence;" these less "serious incidents" might be perceived to be school climate or student development issues. It leaves one with the impression that in America's schools incidents have to be so gratuitous that we must quite literally be hit over the head before we acknowledge that violence is a pressing problem.

***5. Do school psychologists feel prepared to address school violence?*** Despite the fact that more than one third of the school psychologists reported that there was at least a moderate level of violence at their schools, they reported not feeling particularly well prepared to address the problems associated with school violence. Fully 45.3% of them reported that they were unprepared, at some level, to address school violence on their campuses; the mean rating was 3.6 (SD = 1.5). In fact, on the seven-point response scale (1 = totally unprepared to 7 = totally prepared) only 1 school psychologist gave a rating of 7, and this individual attributed this confidence to experiences gained in more than 20 years in the military service. Among the other

school psychologists, 88.9% reported that they need specialized training for school violence, yet only 14.5% had any such training in their university programs. Some of this information is shown in **Figure 3.**

## Implications

**1**. There is a tendency for school psychologists to overlook more gratuitous forms of violence that occur at school. School violence has been popularly defined in terms of extreme forms of physical violence and this has encouraged a narrow definition. It appears that the school psychologists in this survey did not perceive that they had a "school violence problem" until someone quite literally go hit over the head.

**2.** There is a need to reframe the school violence problem so that it understood as part of school psychologists' educational mission. (Morrison, Furlong, & Morrison, in press). This definition should focus on "harm" as opposed to "violence." We can anticipate that individuals will differ in their definition of violence, but all can agree that school's should minimize any harm that occurs to students or staff on school campuses. Such a perspective would include physical, social, and developmental harm. (Refer to School Safety Continuum).

**3**. School psychologists themselves report very low levels of violence victimization on their school campuses. Nonetheless, they do report that numerous "acts of violence" occur on their campuses each month. The most frequently occurring acts involve personal and social insults and attacks, ones that create a poisoned school climate. School psychologists should be prepared to assist schools to plan effectively to reduce the incidence of these frequently occurring forms of harm.

**4**. School psychologists in the survey reported not being particularly well prepared to address violence that occurred on their campus. We believe this finding in part reflects a perception that school violence typically involves serious personal assault, often with a weapon. In any case, many training programs do not provide explicit training of

the knowledge and skills needed to address school violence.

**5.** Although the school psychologists surveyed reported that extreme forms of physical violence occur infrequently on their campuses, they have a low level of efficacy in responding to these crisis situations. There is a need to provide preservice and inservice training to increase school psychologists' skills in these areas.

**6.** At a minimum, the recommendations of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing School Violence Advisory Panel for pupil support personnel should be adopted by school psychologist training programs:

- Knowledge about and skills to implement anger management and conflict resolution prevention and intervention programs.
- Develop expertise in crisis management and consultation to school staff on violence prevention and reduction programs.
- Know how to facilitate coordination of activities with local agencies.
- Use knowledge about youth risk and resiliency to promote a nurturing approach to violence prevention/intervention.
- Develop expertise in individual and systems analysis of violence and safety and climate issues on school campuses.
- Know to how to assume the role of groups facilitator to support a school community's efforts to develop a comprehensive school safety plan, one that aims to make the school better not just less violent.

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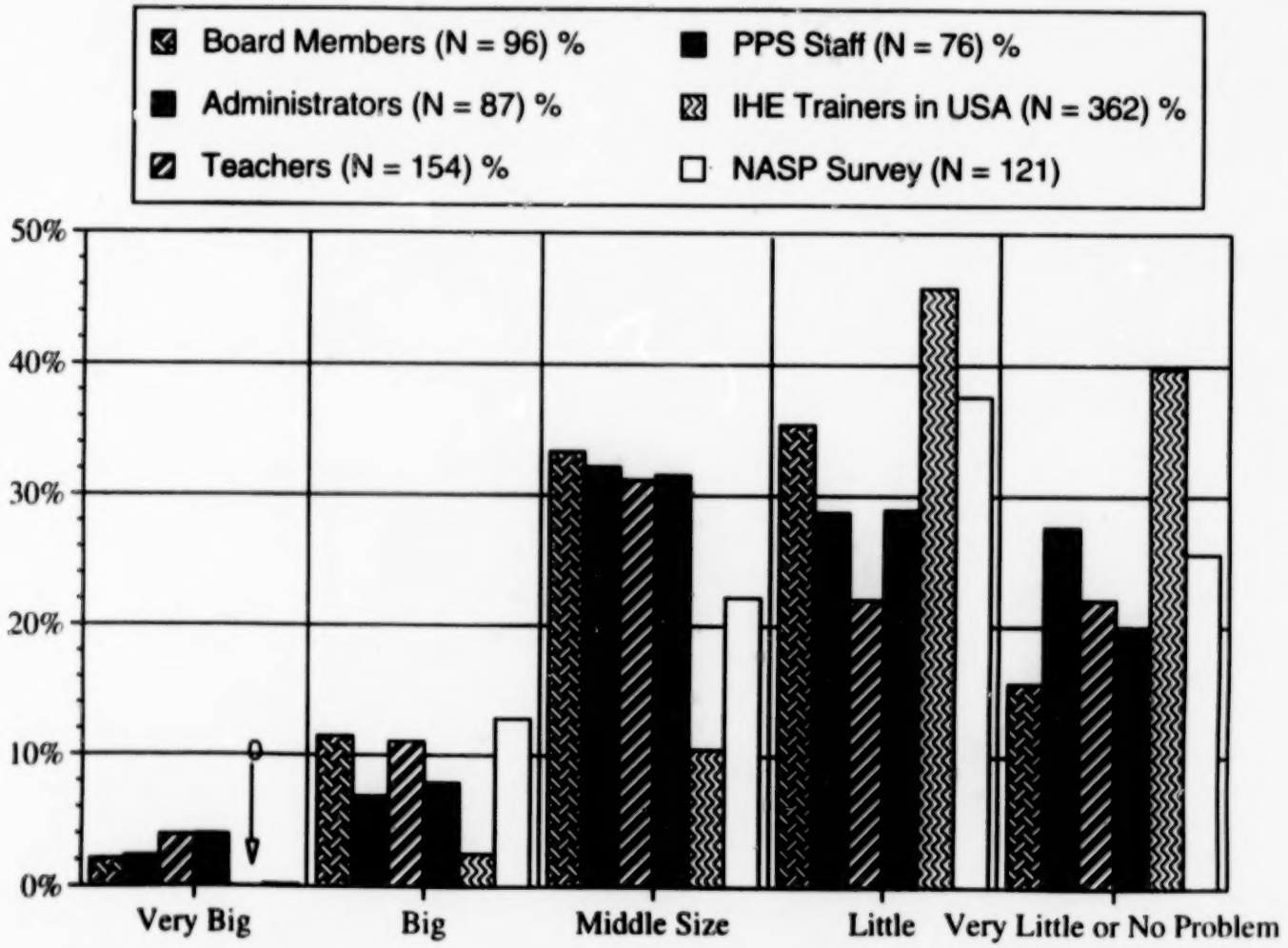



**Size of Violence Problem at MY School**

**Figure 1**

**Figure 2. Types of school violence occurring in the past 30 days as reported by school psychologists who perceive "no violence probelm" or a "violence problem" on the campus.**

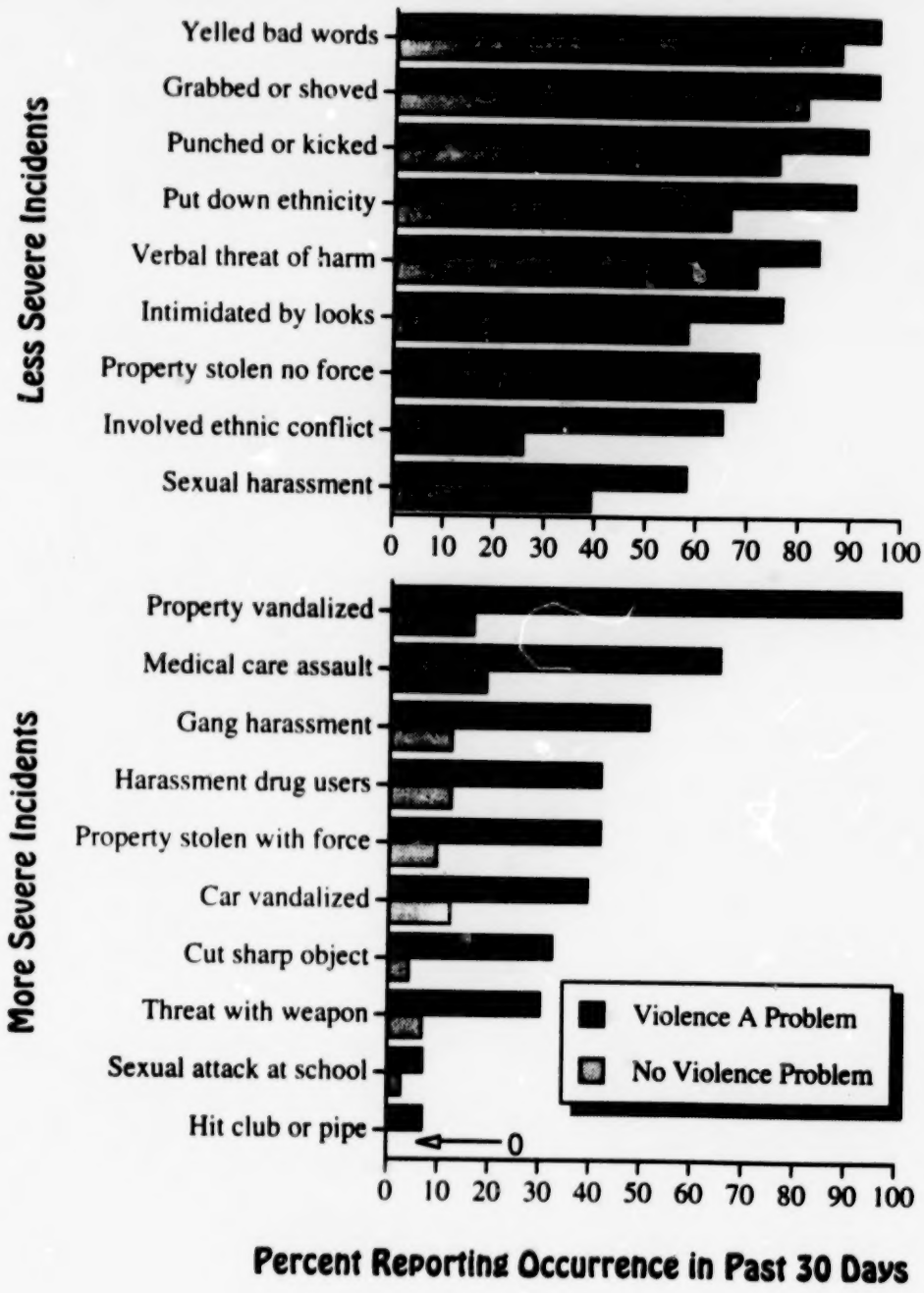
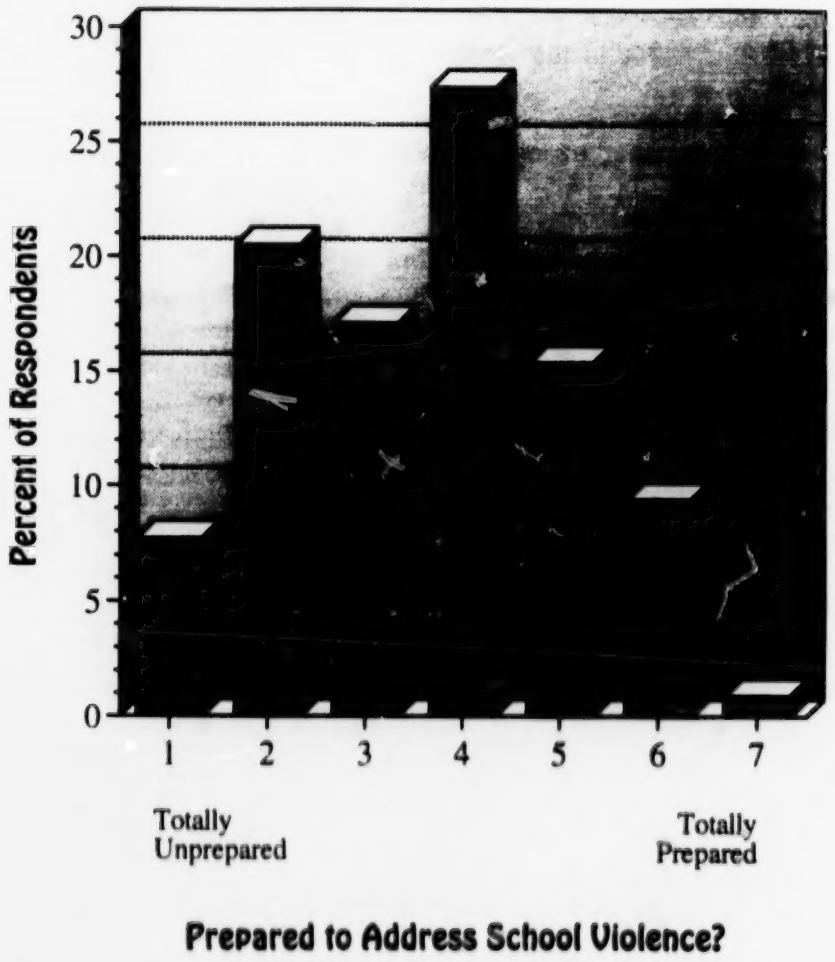


**Figure 3. Level of self-rated preparedness to address school violence.**



## Examples of "Most Violent" Incident to Occur at School
## Comments of School Psychologists

...Threat of being killed with a knife if candy was not bought from other students in junior high.

...One boy holding another boy down on the ground and socking that person repeatedly.

... A kid threw his pencil at my face. I was a sub teacher.

...Verbally assaulted by administrators (more than one) trying to intimidate me into an illegal placement (special education).

... Personally seeing two cars being attacked, windows broken, guys pulled out of cars and beaten badly (no guns) in front of school.

...Female student killed and body dumped at school site during the weekend.

... Female students molested in school restroom by adult intruder.

... A riot at an elementary school, where the students used the school equipment as weapons (e.g., baseball bats, etc.)

... Racial discrimination.

... Sexual harassment by a student.

... Drive-by shooting at high school.

... A 9th grade females stabbed and raped; a late night jogger on school campus. The next morning, there was still blood on the track field and cops on campus. The female was stabbed 32 times over her entire body with a 2" pocket knife (she lived).

... Student fist fights

... Extreme verbal assaults on teachers.

... As a teacher, I was yelled at, sworn at with extreme intensity and then the child said he would kill himself following my "soft" redirection. Child was 8 years old in a small town. I'm now a school psychologist, and although this isn't the worst violence, it affected me the most.

... A student (4th grade) brought a gun to school and shot at door of classroom with teacher inside.

... Teachers yelling and putting down children (these 2 teachers are in a school where there is a lot of poverty, abuse in community). These teachers seemed burned out, they have been there too long.

... Being present and providing triage to the mothers of the dead students (recently killed) at Reseda and Fairfax high school in LAUSD. Also providing triage to the students who saw the killings.

... I was verbally abused by another

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teacher in the hallway and by a principal in front of my students.

... Daily I witness children fighting with other children.

... Three former students were killed execution style and their bodies were left at the junior high school. They had several nephews and children throughout the district who had to cope with their loss. In addition, it took the cops over a month to find the "alleged: murderers, so the students at the junior high were apprehensive about them coming back.

... I was stabbed in the back with a pencil (6th grade). I still have a small piece of graphite near my spine.

... The physical restraining on noncompliant students. These episodes have been conducted by at the instruction of the principal.

... A student verbally threatened to kill me because he did not want to continue his 3-year reevaluation.

... Vicious reprimands of elementary students by vice-principal when I overhear this, I wondered if I should call 911.

... We were required to stay in school several hours past 3:00 PM due to a gunman that police were surrounding on a block near the school.

... Secondary students coming on to an elementary school campus; being aggressive or violent to elementary students.

... Property destruction, tagging, breaking into classrooms, abusing pets, etc.

... A parent coming to a conference and losing control and begin ing to beat their child.

... Rape, sexual abuse, guns loaded on campus, gun held on me and fired.

... Principal hollering at me in a meeting and proceeded to harass me.

... A father began cursing and threatening staff in an IEP meeting.

... A child of kindergarten age who constantly was aggressive to his classmates; hitting them pushing them, tripping them.
... Abduction of a 3rd grade girl on the way to school.

... Shooting in park across from elementary school as students were leaving school.

... When I received a phone call at my home and the caller said that my family would be killed if I revealed some information about a drug situation that I knew something about.